

Dear School Committee Members,

We are the parents of a first grader at Leeds Elementary School. We are writing to ask this committee to find a way to safely and responsibly resume in-person education for our children.

We acknowledge the gravity of the current moment; we are living through a global pandemic. During these extraordinary times, it is critical we find a balance between safeguarding community health while simultaneously providing a credible learning experience for students in our district. Let's be frank, remote learning is not working, and is in no way a substitute for the education our children deserve.

Despite the best efforts of her phenomenally caring and dedicated teacher, our daughter went from being excited about school and "loving Leeds" to saying she hates "Zoom School". She is not alone. Being on Zoom for several hours a day is an ineffective educational modality for young children. This school district currently offers in-person instruction for vulnerable populations and special needs students. We submit to you that our youngest children all equally require this in-person experience.

We know there will always be risks. We know it is not easy, and you have not been given national or state level guidance to follow. However, we ask you to take a science-based approach. Listen to the pediatricians and the health officials. Base decisions on data and metrics, not feelings of insecurity or uncertainty.

We believe in public education. We are frustrated to see private schools find creative ways to bring children back to school, while our children remain at home. We don't want to send our child to private school, but if this district continues to offer only remote schooling we feel our hand will be forced. We recognize this option is a privilege many do not share. It is for everyone's sake that we beseech you to find a way to offer in-person instruction for our youngest children. Bring some normalcy back to their lives, and do not allow their learning to be sacrificed.

Sincerely,

Sarah Rosenthal and David Velez

Northampton, MA

dylan boyd <dylan.boyd@gmail.com>

Tue, Oct 20,
8:47 PM (6
days ago)

to me

Dear School Committee members,

I am writing to you dissuade your committee from voting to transition to the hybrid model of instruction in Northampton schools. I concede that the remote model comes with significant and nearly fatal flaws - chief among them the impact on families and caregivers at home - but the hybrid model carries nearly all of these same flaws.

I am a resident of O'donnell Drive in Florence, and a teacher at the high school, and so come with particular attention to the educational realities of both the remote and hybrid models. The functional flaws of the hybrid model have already been best summed up by a letter from my colleague, Anisa Schardle, that you should have already received. I am including it in full below my signature so that you do not miss it. I will not repeat the more than adequate critique of the assumed success of the hybrid model that is provided in her letter.

For my own words, I will simply say that I recognize the significant and unfair burdens currently borne by our families and caregivers under the current situation. These burdens would certainly be mitigated by even a partial return of students to the buildings. Maybe this is reason enough to make the transition, employing all of the public health strategies that experts insist could make this a save path to pursue. Certainly the community members at the public comments session this past Tuesday, the 20th, were emphasizing the apparent consensus opinion of scientific and public health experts that returning students to schools could be done safely.

Maybe they can, but do not make the incorrect assumption that learning in the building could return under those same safety conditions. Returning students to the buildings will not at all resemble the appearance or functions of schools we remember from pre-pandemic times. By returning students to the building in small numbers, we can offer relief to families and students suffering in terms of stress, overwhelm, and both physical and mental health under the remote model, but it will be at the expense of the moderate learning that is currently being achieved.

I am not prioritizing one over the other. I am simply asking that the committee and the community not maintain unreasonable expectations of what kind of successes a hybrid model will bring. It will put students together with each other, and out of the house a little more often, but it won't actually get them back to "school" in the sense of the word we understood a year ago.

As Michael Stein mentioned in the public comments session - there are only bad choices in this situation. The remote model is deeply flawed, and we - the teachers, staff, students, and families - are doing the best we can to figure it out. We **are** figuring it out. That the situation remains very difficult does not itself disprove a certain amount of success. And transitioning is not going to make this situation better or easier - please consider investing in a path and simply making that path work, and don't waste energy and progress on searching for a "solution" where none exists.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I appreciate that having to make many of these decisions is not easy - again, the options are all bad, really. I am grateful for the opportunity to express my experiences and opinion.

Dylan Boyd

Full text of Anisa Schardl's letter:

I am writing to express my fervent, vehement wish that we never, ever go to the hybrid learning model at the high school. There are definitely reasons why the hybrid learning model would be beneficial for elementary-aged students, but it would be a complete disaster for both teachers and students at the high school level.

I want to make sure that in this decision-making process, we are not operating under either of these faulty assumptions:

1. That the hybrid model is better, and we should move to hybrid when it is safe to. The hybrid model is NOT better at the high school. Even if it is deemed safe to move to the hybrid model, we should choose to remain remote at the high school until it is safe to be fully in-person.
2. That if we make a choice to go to hybrid at the elementary schools, we have to make the same choice at the high schools. We don't! What is good for elementary students and teachers is not what is good for high school students and teachers. We should aim for equity over equality and do what is best for everyone.

I led the team that worked out the schedules for remote and hybrid learning at the high school, so I am very familiar with the schedule and how it was intended to be used. It is much better than I initially thought it could possibly be, but it is still a bad idea. Here are the reasons I think that hybrid learning would be a bad idea for the high school.

1. It's not safe. We can say that we will space the desks apart and require students to wear masks and face the same direction, but the students won't comply. They will take their masks off, turn around, sit on top of each other, and make out in the hallways. They are teenagers, that's what they do. They are at a stage of their development when they defy authority. And they spread the virus as easily as adults do. As a parent of a 4-year-old and a 6-year-old, I am confident in saying that younger kids will be more compliant with safety guidelines than teenagers will.
2. In the remote schedule, we have a whirlwind of 30-minute meetings with our classes every Wednesday morning. It's a good idea, because we can check in with them and set expectations for what work they will do in the afternoon. But it's exhausting for students and for teachers. In the hybrid schedule, we will have that whirlwind four mornings per week. It will be completely exhausting.
3. In the hybrid schedule, high school students are only at school for one long afternoon each week. For the students who are struggling with remote learning, coming to school one afternoon per week is not going to help. Those students need to come to school much more frequently if they are going to succeed in their classes. For most students at the high school, remote learning works pretty well. We should focus our in-person staff resources on getting more time in the building for struggling students, not on getting everyone in the building for one afternoon per week.

4. The high school students won't like it. During remote learning, teachers are giving students opportunities to socialize and bond with each other by putting them into groups with their friends. In hybrid learning, students will be in a room with maybe 7 other students, determined by last name and other logistical factors, who are very likely not their buddies. They will just be resentful that they have to go through a mad rush of a morning schedule, then quickly eat and commute, and then sit in the school for 3+ hours with a mask on and no snacks, just so that they can be in a room with 7 people they don't like. Even if they did like them, having to stay 6 feet away and all face the same direction means that they can't really do collaborative work or interactive activities together anyway. Lesson plans will be less engaging in the hybrid model.

5. My room (214) is not suitable for teaching, according to the ventilation report. However, if it were, the layout is absolutely impossible. With the desks arranged according to health safety guidelines, I have to sit behind the students staring at their backs. I can't stand in front of them, and they can't turn around to look at me. I can't access the board because the student desks are in the way, and they can't face the board anyway. I can't access the projector because it is too far from the teacher desk. Basically, the only lesson plans that will work in my room are lessons that I give them to do on the computer. If they weren't already resentful about the hybrid schedule, they will certainly be resentful when they realize that they are just doing remote learning activities in the school building.

6. Since we can't stream our classrooms, we will have to put students who choose to stay fully remote into separate, fully remote sections. Because students at the high school take many different classes, this creates a massive scheduling problem, and I don't think we currently have a computer program that is ready to solve it. Adding in the fact that some teachers will need to be remote, this problem becomes even worse.

7. Since teachers will have to teach both remote and in-person students, in order to plan engaging work, their lesson planning problem becomes even larger. The workload, which is already crushing for many teachers in the remote model, will be even worse. Teacher burnout will be a very serious problem.

I am begging you to please, please think about what the hybrid model would really mean for teachers and students at the high school and do NOT choose the hybrid model for the high school. It would simply be bad for teachers and bad for students.

Anisa

Dear School Committee:

My name is Caroline Bertrand and I live in Florence with my husband and our two daughters. One is a current 7th-grader on the Green Revolution Team at JFK and the other is a 4th-grader at RK Finn Ryan Road School. I had attempted to speak during last night's meeting but was unable to do so since I raised my hand so late so I am really hoping this email is read and considered - especially given the number of folks that spoke in support of going back to school in-person. From what I see on social media and from those I have spoken with (parents, administrators, teachers, etc.), I don't feel the other side was adequately represented. I am 100% against going back to school in any manner at this point. I feel this way for a number of reasons and will simplify this with a bulleted list below.

- The teachers are doing a PHENOMENAL job!! I see improvements made on a weekly basis and it is so clear how lucky we are in this district to have staff that is so dedicated. It is clear they are putting their hearts and souls, not to mention countless hours to learn new tech, offer materials drop off and/or pick up, etc., into full remote learning. I have reached out to many of both of my daughters' teachers over the past month + with questions and/or concerns and every single one of them has been quick to respond and has been able to help rectify the situation. They are in constant contact with us caregivers about weekly assignments. I can honestly not say enough how impressed my husband and I have been and how well they are doing at engaging the kids remotely. To switch on them will only cause more work as they adapt to a new format, but let's also talk about the disruption this will cause for kids. We hear over and over again how much structure and consistency is important for children to succeed. The kids are adapting to our current situation - yes, not without challenges but to throw them into a new situation for what will likely not be too long as the scientists and medical professionals warn that #s will rise as the colder temps force more people inside, just seems unfair and honestly, cruel.
- I'd love to hear why this is considered a good idea for again, what would likely be a finite period of time.
- My father is terminally ill and my mother is also extremely immunocompromised. I am their primary caregiver and live 2.5 hours away. For the first 3 or so months, I would travel to them on the weekends to grocery shop and do laundry but not stay over. I did start staying over as it became an exhausting schedule to maintain but I have not hugged them since February. My children did not lay eyes on them until the end of June and have only seen them 2 other times since. Both my parents and my girls yearn for those visits and if they go back to school, I will not be comfortable having my girls around my parents nor will I feel comfortable doing more than a day trip for laundry and grocery shopping again. What about the kids who LIVE with caregivers or family members who are ill and/or immunocompromised? They don't have the choice I do, as painful as it is, to keep my kids away from my parents. Do they just hope for the best?
- I understand the concern about the children and their social and emotional needs. Believe me, parenting a preteen girl is challenging in non-COVID times, let alone today, but there are ways to let the kids socialize. It's not ideal but what is these days? You can sign up for a free Zoom account and schedule regular "meetings" where your kids can socialize with a group of friends. I did that for my then 3rd-grader last spring and they had loads of fun. Socially distanced walks, bike rides, picnics - even as the temps get

lower, have all been positive options - just to have some connection. It feels to me that if schools open again to all, the choice being made is those who are immunocompromised are expendable.

- I've heard from some staff members in the district that are in-school teaching as they are special education teachers, that they feel safe at this time because they have dedicated space and are able to adequately socially distance. I find it hard to believe everyone will feel that way with a hybrid or full in-person scenario.
- How are the buildings? I have not heard an update on the HVAC systems. Opening windows is not enough.
- There are children and adults who, for various reasons, cannot wear a mask. That is understandable but what about the safety of them and those they interact with?
- My sister-in-law is a 4th-grade teacher at a school in a neighboring district and no one (parents and staff included), or at least very few, appear to be happy with the hybrid model. The amount of tears she has shed out of fear, out of pure exhaustion, out of frustration for being so scared, out of concern for her kids because she spends that much more time trying to teach to kids in school and remote at the same time, it is honestly heart wrenching and what she is being paid does not come close to what she deserves not to mention the fact that she is putting her life on the line daily. This also impacts her ability to visit her mom, who is also part of the most vulnerable population.

I understand that there is no perfect option for everyone. This is not a one-size fits all situation but given that, I would implore you choose safety over the pressure you are feeling to get kids back in school. Given the amount of anxiety we are living with, including the kids, why add another reason to be anxious and scared? I can see this affecting many kid's emotional well-being more than being home.

I very much appreciate your time, attention and consideration.

Sincerely,
Caroline Bertrand
cmb05@comcast.net
413-387-9527



Tara Orzolek <taraorzolek@gmail.com>

Mon, Oct 19,
1:44 PM (7
days ago)

to me

Please find the following to be entered as written testimony for the school committee meeting on Tuesday, October 20.

I am a parent of two Northampton School District students—a 7th grader at JFK and a 9th grader at NHS—and I strongly support moving to a Hybrid model for learning.

Although the staff and teachers say they are “guided by science”, the last Mass DPH report (<https://www.mass.gov/doc/weekly-covid-19-public-health-report-october-14-2020/download>), shows that Northampton is a “green” community (average daily case rate over the last 14 days: <4 cases per 100,000 population) and the positivity rate for the last 2 weeks has remained at 0.14%. My question is: **if not now, then when? If there is no move to re-open schools when the positivity rate is as close as it can be to 0%, when will it happen?** I am not advocating for a re-opening in the midst of a localized outbreak, and I believe that Dr. Provost in conjunction with other school authorities, the local government and health departments, can adequately monitor the daily positivity rate and make decisions when needed to periodically close schools when this rate increases, much as he makes a decision to close schools in anticipate of inclement weather or a blizzard. The school community will be able to adapt to this (and the acclimatization of the students/teachers to remote learning over these past weeks will make a temporary closure relatively seamless.) I trust we will be vigilant with regards to testing, positivity rates, and community infections. I trust that this will be monitored closely on a daily basis and in school learning will be modified and changed as needed. We must all learn to be flexible.

But I simply do not understand what you are waiting for if you do not move to re-open schools now. And I feel the teachers and staff of the NPD are hijacking the education of our children **due to fear, not science**. The New York City public school system—obviously far, far larger than Northampton and with far more risk inherent due to the density of the city population—has opened with minimal issue (see article in The NY Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/19/nyregion/schools-coronavirus.html>).

Is it rational that a grocery cashier can work in a store over a period of perhaps 6 or more hours, in contact with hundreds of strangers, and yet teachers and staff cannot be in a room with a decreased class size (I imagine no more than 8 students)? Is it rational that we are opening up (with precautions) local businesses and kids and parents are out and about taking part many activities (with precautions) but the schools refuse to open?

Likewise, there has been no indication to the school community (parents/guardians/students) as to **WHAT POSITIVITY RATE IS ACCEPTABLE**. There has been no metric that has been released saying: When positivity rates go below “X” for a period of X weeks, we will move to a hybrid model. Why? If you are not voting for a hybrid model, then will a metric be at least released and be held accountable to? (Note, again—you can’t say you rely on science and then be motivated by fear of what *might* happen.)

We know that there is not going to be a 0% positivity rate even when a vaccine is introduced. It will take years for this to happen. So will schools remain closed until then?

At least give us a choice. At least give students and parents a choice.

In addition:

- To reiterate: While the schools remain closed, the rest of the community (stores, restaurants, sports, etc) has opened up, albeit with caution. **It is hypocritical and irrational that students must learn from home yet can go to a restaurant, to a store, to a coffee shop, to a park, and participate in sports.** They are getting the same amount of possible exposure in these places as they would in a school setting; and I would say the same applies to the teachers and staff, unless all teachers and staff are not leaving their houses. My understanding is that the hybrid model will be nowhere near the same as a normal school day; as I reviewed the hybrid plan again this morning, it seems that for high school students, they would only even be in school one day a week. I realize there is fear of transmission among kids and to/from households, but with proper monitoring and protocols and the decreased number of students in a shared space, I am not sure how different being in the school is than being in a grocery store for an hour, which much of the population has taken to doing. And I would honestly rather not go to restaurants and stores as a sacrifice if it meant the kids could go back to school some of the time.
- At this point in the trajectory of the pandemic, **most kids are aware of the necessary protocol** of wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, and practicing good hygiene as far as hand-washing and non-necessary touching. I would argue that wearing a mask is now as second nature as putting on shoes or a coat. I do not believe there will be significant issues for students to follow these protocol throughout the day.
- My daughters have been doing well to a degree and coping with the remote system, and I applaud the teachers and administration for doing an excellent job at making remote learning work. However, **I worry about their emotional well-being and I worry that they are losing hope, curiosity, and frankly some bit of resilience** (note this article that appeared in the New York Times recently <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/style/my-kids-dont-want-to-go-outside.html>). I also know that my daughters are lucky and privileged to have separate spaces to work in, good internet connections, two parents working at home and able to help as needed and ensure they are logging into class on time and completing their work. I know many students do not have this same privilege. At the same time, **I do not think my daughters are progressing and learning as they would be if they were in school.** It is no wonder that many, many public health officials and physicians have advocated for in-person learning as being vital to the intellectual and emotional development of children and adolescents. I know that there will not be any full-time in school learning for quite some time, possible through the entirety of this school year; and yet, I feel that even a few hours for 2 or 3 days a week would strengthen not only the learning process but the psychological and emotional inner framework of students, which would enable semi-remote learning to continue without any long term consequences. Hybrid learning will increase accountability, make school seem “real” again (instead of something merely on the level of another virtual or social media platform) and generate hope and intellectual curiosity. And we must make this change to start to cope with the virus—much like the rest of the community has adapted.
- Note this article published by parents in Belmont, Mass., who seem to be in a similar situation with a low positivity rate: <https://belmont.wickedlocal.com/news/20200921/its-time-to-reopen-belmont-schools>

- Note this article that recently appeared in The New Yorker and was published also by the investigative journalism site ProPublica: <https://www.propublica.org/article/the-students-left-behind-by-remote-learning>. While Northampton is not Baltimore (the focus of the article), I do think that many of the issues brought up in the article are relevant to the situation here. In particular there are several paragraphs that outline research and opinions from leading Public Health experts in the country (including those from Johns Hopkins and Harvard), including the following: *A number of experts were beginning to agree with Nuzzo and Sharfstein. **According to reports the rate of infection among teachers in Sweden which as part of its less restrictive response to the virus had left most of its schools open was no greater than it was in neighboring Finland which had closed all its schools. "They found that teachers had the same risk of COVID as the average of other professions" said Martin Kulldorff a professor at Harvard Medical School who develops statistical and epidemiological methods for disease surveillance.***

I thank you for reading this and I hope you will take this into consideration when you vote on Thursday.

Tara Orzolek
4 School St, Northampton, MA 01060
617-838-7466

Valerie Reiss <valerie@valeriereiss.com>

Wed, Oct 21,
4:04 PM (5
days ago)

to me

Hi Annie,

I'm a Leeds School parent. Here is my statement regarding the upcoming discussions and vote for hybrid learning.

Thanks,
Valerie

Hi folks,

I have an only-child first-grader at Leeds. We have been in lockdown like everyone else - wearing masks in public, limiting our exposure to others, very much believing in and adhering to the science-based recommendations around COVID. That said, we are desperate to have our son have some kind of in-person component to his education.

The data so far are extremely promising when it comes to young kids and schools--as long as protocols are followed.

My son, at the very beginning of his school career, now says he "hates school." He's incredibly bright and curious and was recently diagnosed with ADHD, making it extra-challenging to work remotely. This hating of school from the get-go doesn't have to be. I would LOVE to see small pods that meet outside a few days a week, or masked pods that meet six-feet apart inside.

He went to Camp Prospect this summer at the YMCA and all was well--he had two weeks of being with peers and his moods balanced out and he just seemed so much calmer and happier. We attribute it directly with the ability to interact with kids his age and do activities with them.

I understand that many parents do not want to go back and I respect that choice. I know some teachers are wary and I totally understand that, which is why I support having every protocol in place.

But I also know that the American Academy of Pediatrics urges a safe return to school. (<https://services.aap.org/en/news-room/news-releases/aap/2020/pediatricians-educators-and-superintendents-urge-a-safe-return-to-school-this-fall/>). New York City's schools have managed a safe return (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/19/nyregion/schools-coronavirus.html>). My nieces and nephew are back in Boston and their mental/emotional health has returned to balance.

I am watching my son's emotional health and his entire attitude toward school deteriorate. I myself am unable to work because having a first-grader on Zoom school is a full-time job. This in itself is a crisis for our community as well.

I believe in science, I believe in safety, and I believe that having our kids go back to school safely, intelligently, optionally--in some capacity--is the best thing for my kid, and for many others as well.

Thank you,
Valerie Reiss, Leeds

Terre Parker

Wed,
Oct 7,
3:42 PM

to me

Hello,
Thank you School Committee Members for your steadfast service to our community. My name is Terre Parker and I am the parent of a Kindergarten student at Leeds Elementary. I write to comment on the pending decision about whether to continue with

the remote learning model or move to a hybrid model. I am impressed by the dedication and ingenuity displayed by my child's teacher and all the educators at Leeds. My child has successfully engaged in learning via Zoom and through the hands on resources my child's teacher provides. Virtual kindergarten is not ideal, but in this unique situation, it is much more beneficial for the remote learning model to continue. My child has *just* gotten used to the rituals and routines of the current learning model. Having to transition to a new model would disrupt this routine and my child's learning.

Given that we are entering the winter flu season and that COVID-19 rates in the surrounding areas are rising, if we shifted to a hybrid model it is likely that we would have to shift back to a remote model before the end of winter. This disruption would not serve my child's learning experience. What would be most helpful is support for my child's classroom teacher, more accessible tech support for devices, and more hands on learning materials to bring home, *not* having to shift between different learning models.

In a hybrid model, if my child was required to be physically present at school and to be vigilant to not touch or go near others, my child would not be comfortable enough to learn. This kind of rigid learning environment would teach the skills of Kindergarten far less well than the now comfortable, virtual school structure.

However, even more important than our children's learning experiences is the health and well being of our community. The remote model is more sensible given the trajectory of the pandemic. It is so important that we keep our teachers safe so they can continue to do their excellent work as educators. I urge you to continue the remote learning model to keep our teachers and community safe and to provide our children with a consistent learning experience, which we can all continue to build on.

Thank you for your consideration and for your dedication to our community.

Sincerely,
Terre Parker
8 Villone Drive #5
Leeds, MA
413-727-2988

Sarah
Rosenthal <rosenthal.sarah@gmail.com>

to northampton-school-committee@northampton-k12.us, David

Tue, Oct 6, 6:40 AM

Dear School Committee Members,

We are the parents of a first grader at Leeds Elementary School. We are writing to ask this committee to find a way to safely and responsibly resume in-person education for our children.

We acknowledge the gravity of the current moment; we are living through a global pandemic. During these extraordinary times, it is critical we find a balance between safeguarding community health while simultaneously providing a credible learning experience for students in our district. Let's be frank, remote learning is not working, and is in no way a substitute for the education our children deserve.

Despite the best efforts of her phenomenally caring and dedicated teacher, our daughter went from being excited about school and "loving Leeds" to saying she hates "Zoom School". She is not alone. Being on Zoom for several hours a day is an ineffective educational modality for young children. This school district currently offers in-person instruction for vulnerable populations and special needs students. We submit to you that our youngest children all equally require this in-person experience.

We know there will always be risks. We know it is not easy, and you have not been given national or state level guidance to follow. However, we ask you to take a science-based approach. Listen to the pediatricians and the health officials. Base decisions on data and metrics, not feelings of insecurity or uncertainty.

We believe in public education. We are frustrated to see private schools find creative ways to bring children back to school, while our children remain at home. We don't want to send our child to private school, but if this district continues to offer only remote schooling we feel our hand will be forced. We recognize this option is a privilege many do not share. It is for everyone's sake that we beseech you to find a way to offer in-person instruction for our youngest children. Bring some normalcy back to their lives, and do not allow their learning to be sacrificed.

Sincerely,

Sarah Rosenthal and David Velez

Northampton, MA